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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether perceived parental self-efficacy was related to childrearing attitudes among 113 first-time mothers of 6- to 12-month-old infants. Perceived parental self-efficacy was measured using the Maternal Self-Efficacy Scale (D. M. Teti and D. M. Gelfand, 1991) and the Lips Maternal Self-Confidence Scale (H. M. Lips, 1984). An instrument was developed to measure childrearing beliefs. The study found a small but significant correlation between childrearing beliefs and perceived parental self-efficacy. Analysis of the subscales of the measure of childrearing beliefs revealed that the subscale measuring the dimension of enjoyment/aggravation regarding the parental role was most closely related to mothers' feelings of self-efficacy. Thus mothers who enjoyed their role as parents also felt positive about their parenting capabilities. Suggestions for further research are discussed. (Contains 16 references.) (MDM)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED PARENTAL SELF-EFFICACY AND CHILDREARING BELIEFS AMONG FIRST-TIME MOTHERS OF INFANTS

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According to Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977; 1982; 1986), high perceived parental self-efficacy (PPSE) should be advantageous in parenting, enhancing performance by enabling a parent to confidently undertake parenting tasks, invest considerable effort in them when needed, and persist should the tasks become challenging. Previous research, however, has been inconclusive about the relationship between self-efficacy and maternal behavior. While some researchers have found relationships between measures of PPSE and variables such as lower incidence of maternal depression (Cutrona and Troutman, 1986), maternal behavioral competence (Teti and Gelfand, 1991; Teti, Gelfand, and Pompa, 1990), and more positive maternal evaluations of the experience of motherhood and the infant (Leifer, 1977; Reilly, Entwisle, and Doering, 1987; Williams et al., 1987), others have found no relationship (Zahr, 1991) or negative relationships with measures of maternal behavior (Luster, 1986; Luster & Rhoades, 1989).

Examination of Bandura's self-efficacy theory points to the need to assess perceived parental self-efficacy in conjunction with other parenting cognitions before judgment can be made about its significance for good parenting. In particular, childrearing beliefs may be essential to mothers' ideas about what kinds of skills are necessary to be a good parent, and therefore to their evaluations of their parenting abilities. When Luster and Rhoades (1989) examined childrearing beliefs in conjunction with parental self-efficacy and parental behavior, they found that mothers who perceived themselves as being more competent as parents were more likely to believe that affectionate and responsive parenting can spoil infants, that babies' freedom to explore the home should be restricted, that strict discipline and control of children's behavior are important, and that talking and reading to young children are not essential. These mothers' attitudes were reflected in their behavior: ratings of the quality of the rearing environments they provided for their infants were low. This study suggests that mothers who feel most competent in their parenting abilities have different ideas about parenting and different parenting practices than do less confident mothers, and that these ideas and practices may be less than optimal, in terms of what current child development and parenting "experts" suggest.

It is not clear, then, what perceived self-efficacy means when applied to parenting ability. Ideally, parents should possess both an appropriate set of childrearing attitudes and a strong sense of parental self-efficacy. What, though, of parents who have one of these attributes, but not the other? A strong sense of parental self-efficacy may not be a positive quality if coupled with a set of childrearing attitudes which are unsuitable. On the other hand, the effectiveness of a parent with an appropriate set of childrearing attitudes but a low

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perceived parental self-efficacy may be questionable. Although Bandura's theory (1977; 1982; 1986) promotes the idea that a positive, accurate self-efficacy is beneficial and perhaps even necessary for good performance, in the area of parenting the relationship between perceived self-efficacy and performance is unclear, and perhaps confounded by other variables.

In view of this uncertainty, the area of perceived parental self-efficacy as it relates to parenting ability needs to be examined closely. Although it is beyond the scope of a single study to resolve the dilemma presented above and determine whether perceived parental self-efficacy or appropriate childrearing attitudes are more essential to effective parenting, this study seeks to investigate whether perceived parental self-efficacy is related to childrearing attitudes so that we can begin to understand its relevance to parenting behavior. On the basis of self-efficacy theory, it is hypothesized that there is no relationship between childrearing beliefs and perceived parental self-efficacy among mothers of infants. Knowing more about this relationship will allow parent educators to focus their efforts in the relevant areas so that parents can get the kind of help they need to learn appropriate childrearing practices and gain the confidence they need to effectively use them.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 113 first-time mothers of 6- to 12-month-old infants. The mean age of the mothers was 29.8 years and their babies averaged 38.8 weeks of age. 56.6% of the mothers had male babies. The mothers in the sample were mostly white (95.6%), married (92%), well educated (73.5% college graduates), and upper middle class.

Measures

Perceived parental self-efficacy. Perceived parental self-efficacy was measured using two instruments, the Maternal Self-Efficacy Scale (MSES; Teti & Gelfand, 1991), which assessed mothers' feelings of efficacy for both the day-to-day parenting tasks, and the Lips Maternal Self-Confidence Scale (LMSCS; Lips, 1984), which was designed to assess mothers' global feelings about whether they are doing a good job of raising their infant in a general sense. Both measures are Likert-format self-report instruments which had demonstrated good reliability (for MSES, Cronbach's alpha = .79 to .86 [Teti & Gelfand, 1991; Teti, Gelfand, & Pompa, 1990], and for LMSCS, test-retest r = .88 and Cronbach's alpha = .88 to .91 [Lips, Bloom, & Barnett, 1988]). Data from the current sample yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .74 for the MSES and .89 for the LMSCS.

Childrearing beliefs. Although many instruments exist which assess childrearing beliefs (see Holden & Edwards, 1989 for a review), no instrument could be located which was geared specifically toward parents of infants and which had demonstrated acceptable levels of reliability in previous use. For this study, an instrument was developed to assess childrearing beliefs which is appropriate to use with parents of infants. This instrument, the Survey of Beliefs about Parenting Infants (SBPI), was designed to tap two dimensions which have repeatedly emerged in the literature as distinct factors in parents' childrearing beliefs: parental control vs. encouragement of autonomy, and nurturance of the child and acceptance of the parental role (see Kochanska, Kuczynski, & Radke-Yarrow, 1989; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). A pool of items was gathered from various instruments and a questionnaire consisting of 37

items was assembled and used for this research. The questionnaire is presented in the Likert format, with a 5-point response scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Cronbach's alpha for the complete instrument computed on the current sample was .85. The items selected for the first dimension, parental control vs. encouragement of autonomy, were written in four subareas: importance of discipline and discipline methods endorsed (discipline; 5 items α = .49), encouragement of autonomy (autonomy; 5 items α = .61), strictness (strictness; 5 items α = .64), and freedom to explore (freedom; 5 items α = .46). The second dimension, nurturance of the child/acceptance of the parental role, was made up of three subareas: beliefs about spoiling (spoiling; 5 items α = .78), beliefs in infants' need for warmth and affection (affection; 6 items α = .34), and feelings of enjoyment/aggravation regarding the parental role (enjoyment; 6 items α = .70).

Procedures

Subjects were recruited through notices in local newspapers and parents' guides, flyers placed in the community, postcards sent to mothers from a childbirth preparation class and newspaper birth announcements, and by referrals from previous subjects, friends and acquaintances of the researcher, a day care center, and classes for new mothers. As an incentive to complete the forms, mothers were told that a packet of parenting and child development information and coupons for baby products would be sent to them once their questionnaires were returned. 93% of the surveys distributed or mailed to participants were completed and returned.

All of the mothers who called or were contacted by the researcher agreed to participate. Each participant was mailed a packet containing a letter about the study, an informed consent form attached to the letter, the questionnaires combined in booklet form, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. They were asked to complete the forms within a few days and return them by mail. Most questionnaires were completed and returned within one to two weeks.

Results

Descriptive Data

Descriptive data for the instruments used are provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Data for the Instruments Used.

	Scale Mean	SD	Range
Maternal Self-Efficacy Scale (MSES)	34.35	2.79	24 to 39
Lips Maternal Self-Confidence Scale (LMSCS)	115.09	12.99	71 to 139
Survey of Beliefs about Parenting Infants (SBPI)	154.39	14.23	117 to 184

Relationship Between Independent and Dependent Variables

Correlations were computed between the childrearing beliefs scores and each of the measures of the dependent variable. The SBPI showed a significant positive relationship with each of the self-efficacy measures), although the magnitude of the relationships were small (see Table 2).

Table 2
Zero-order Correlations Between SBPI and Self-Efficacy Measures.

	Maternal Self Efficacy Scale (MSES)	Lips Maternal Self-Confidence Scale (LMSCS)
Survey of Beliefs about Parenting Infants (SBPI)	.21, $p < .05$	.18, $p < .05$

To test which aspects of childrearing beliefs were related to perceived parental self-efficacy, multiple regression was performed using the subscales of the SBPI to predict both measures of the dependent variable. The set of subscales significantly predicted both the MSES ($R = .48$, $R^2 = .23$, adj$R^2 = .18$, $F [7, 105] = 4.53$, $p < .001$) and the LMSCS ($R = .68$, $R^2 = .46$, adj$R^2 = .42$, $F [7, 105] = 12.98$, $p < .001$). The individual correlations between the subscale scores and the dependent measures were then examined (see Table 3). A similar pattern of results emerged for both the MSES and the LMSCS, with the subscale measuring enjoyment/aggravation regarding the parental role having the largest correlation with perceived parental self-efficacy, and most of the other subscales having no relationship. Because of the a priori nature of the subscales, these relationships should be interpreted as approximations which indicate an important direction for further research.

Table 3
Zero-order Correlations Between SBPI Subscales and Self-Efficacy Measures.

	Maternal Self-Efficacy Scale (MSES)	Lips Maternal Self-Confidence Scale (LMSCS)
Discipline	.16*	.09
Autonomy	.04	.00
Strictness	.07	-.03
Freedom	.25**	.18*
Spoiling	.06	.09
Affection	.10	.11
Enjoyment	.40***	.64***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Relationship Between Measures of the Dependent Variable

The Pearson correlation coefficient computed between the Maternal Self-Efficacy Scale and the Lips Maternal Self-Confidence Scale was .68 ($p < .001$).

Discussion

Although it was hypothesized that there would be no relationship between childrearing beliefs and perceived parental self-efficacy, a small but significant positive correlation was uncovered. The size of the correlation, which accounted for less than 5% of the variance shared between beliefs and each of the self-efficacy measures, prohibits making persuasive statements that a positive sense of parental self-efficacy is associated with an appropriate set of childrearing beliefs.

Analysis of the subscales of the measure of childrearing beliefs revealed that the subscale measuring the dimension of enjoyment/aggravation regarding the parental role was most closely related to mothers' feelings of self-efficacy. This was especially true for the general parental self-efficacy measure, where the relationship was rather substantial. Not surprisingly, mothers who enjoy their roles as parents also feel positive about their parenting capabilities.

Two other subscales also showed some relationship to self-efficacy: the measurement of the importance of discipline and discipline methods endorsed and the measurement of freedom to explore. The discipline subscale was slightly correlated with the task-specific measure of self-efficacy but was unrelated to the more general measure. The freedom subscale was related to both measures of self-efficacy, but again the relationships were not strong. Once more, both of these correlations support the idea that high self-efficacy is associated with appropriate childrearing beliefs, but the magnitudes of the relationships limit the applicability of this notion in real-life situations.

The subscales measuring encouragement of autonomy, strictness, beliefs about spoiling, and beliefs in infants' need for warmth and affection were not related to either measure of perceived parental self-efficacy. In the absence of relationships between these dimensions and self-efficacy, it is possible for mothers to hold undesirable beliefs in these areas and still feel that they are doing a good job as parents. This is incompatible with the assumption that self-efficacy has a positive influence on maternal behavior and may account for the lack of consensus in the debate about the link between mothers' feelings of self-efficacy and their behavior with their babies.

The results of this study indicate that caution should be taken in reasoning that perceived parental self-efficacy is associated with appropriate parenting skills and behaviors. The relationship between self-efficacy and childrearing beliefs, although significant, is small enough that a positive sense of self-efficacy is still associated with a wide range of childrearing beliefs, and therefore possibly with a wide range of parenting behaviors. The weak link between these two variables may mean that parents, regardless of the appropriateness of their beliefs, evaluate their efficacy as parents based on the skillsets which fit the beliefs they hold. In this case, the relationship of self-efficacy to behavior could only be tested by relating perceived parental self-efficacy to the specific set of beliefs a parent holds.

Implications for Practice

The results of this research have implications for parent education. People who work with parents have often said that those parents who sign up for parent education courses and read books on parenting are not the parents who need the most help; those parents are at home thinking they don't need much outside guidance in raising their children. This research supports such observations: Mothers' feelings of confidence in their parenting abilities do not necessarily reflect the fact that they have appropriate ideas about how to raise their infants. Indeed, the mothers who skip the parent education seminars because they are confident in their abilities may have very different ideas about parenting infants from what they might have heard if they had attended. Self-efficacy theory would predict such an occurrence. Bandura asserts that people with lower self-efficacies are more motivated in a learning situation, while those with higher self-efficacies may not feel the need to exert the effort to gain more knowledge. This may be especially true for parents who have high self-efficacies, and who know that the "experts" disagree with them. Not only would their motivation to learn be low, but to endure the discomfort of having their beliefs challenged would make it unlikely that they would seek out such a situation. For parent educators, this may mean that the population who most need their services is the most resistant to receiving them.

One job of parent educators, then, is to develop confidence among mothers who have appropriate childrearing beliefs. Self-efficacy theory would suggest that reassuring such parents that parenting well is within their capabilities may help them become better parents. It is more of a challenge to develop parent education programs to reach parents at the opposite end of the spectrum, those whose confidence is high but beliefs inappropriate. Prevention may be the best hope: Parent education beginning in middle school may increase knowledge and shape childrearing beliefs before clear feelings of adequacy develop and preclude further input. For those hard-to-reach parents who are firmly entrenched in their inappropriate beliefs and high self-efficacies, such methods as public service announcements on television about appropriate parenting may, over time, plant the notion that alternative parenting techniques are valid and effective and arouse an interest in learning more.

Suggestions for Further Research

The results of this study point to the need for further research in this area. Self-efficacy theory may have some implications for parenting behavior. What is needed for a clearer understanding of the relationship between self-efficacy and behavior is more knowledge about the factors which may influence the relationship.

An area for investigation is the effect of feedback on self-efficacy. Parents get little empirical feedback about the job they are doing. The feedback they do receive is usually in the form of commentary from others about their performance; seldom do they receive results-oriented feedback. Bandura maintains that confidence must be combined with the necessary skills to perform well, but the shortage of feedback makes parents' assessments of their skills difficult. This makes the relationship between skills and outcome unclear and gives parents very little on which to base their judgments of self-efficacy. Helping parents see that specific behaviors they perform (such as reading daily to a one-year-old) result in specific outcomes in their infants (such as increased vocabulary) and observing the effects on self-efficacy would be informative.

Parents' differing skill levels also may come between self-efficacy and behavior, and this is another area to address in further research. Specific skills which are thought to be essential for effective parenting, such as patience and listening skills, could be assessed and related to self-efficacy and behavior.

Self-efficacy theory addresses the area of outcome expectancies, and this is another important area for further research. Parents who believe that what they do has little effect on how their child turns out may behave very differently from parents who think they have a great deal of influence on their child's outcome, even if their levels of self-efficacy are similar. This is especially relevant in today's society, where there is widespread belief that even children of the best parents can be profoundly affected by extrafamilial influences. Measuring outcome expectancies and relating them to perceived parental self-efficacy and parenting behavior could be very informative.

The results of this study are limited because its conclusions must be restricted to the population to which it can be generalized. Further research should attempt to employ more diverse samples in terms of ethnicity, age, and SES, to see if the relationships found here hold true among wider groups of mothers. In addition, a range of parity could be examined to see what influence mothers' experience with their previous children has on self-efficacy. It would also be interesting to investigate relationships between these variables among fathers and among parents of older children.

It is hoped that the results of this research and further research in this area will increase the body of knowledge about the nature of perceived parental self-efficacy among mothers of infants, so that the construct can be used appropriately in research and so that parent educators can foster suitable feelings of confidence along with the other skills essential for good parenting.

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